

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.
A TALE OF
THE EMPIRE UNDER PETER THE GREAT

CHAPTER I.

THE GUNMAKER AND THE MONK.

The time at which we open our story is mid-winter, and toward the close of the seventh century, Russia had passed through the long and bitter ordeal of national Night. The Tartar yoke had been worn till the very bones of the nation were galed; and when this was thrown off, civil dissensions and insurrections commenced. The Poles and Swedes plundered the country, and amid general tumult and confusion some half dozen men were clamoring for the throne. At length a few patriotic citizens, pledging everything they held dear on earth to the cause of freedom from this curse of anarchy, and headed by a noble prince and an humble, patriotic butcher, made bold stand to save the country. Moscow was taken, and Michael Romanoff was chosen Czar; and this illustrious family still occupies the imperial throne. And now the day of Russian greatness dawned; but the sun was not fairly up—the broad light opened not upon the empire—until Peter came to the throne.

In the department of the Stoboda—the suburbs of Moscow—and very near the river Moscow, stood an humble hut, the exterior of which betrayed a meanness of arrangement and a show of taste that more than any other foreshadowed smallness of size. Nor was it so very small in fact, but only in contrast; for near at hand about it stood many large, shabby, dirty-looking structures that overlooked the prim est, as bleak mountains may look down upon a verdant hill. And within this est was as neat as without. The two apartments in front, one of which was only used in winter, were furnished not only with neatness, but with a fair show of ornament and luxury. Back of those were a large cooking and dining room and two small bedrooms; and back still from these was an artisan's shop and other outbuildings. This shop was devoted to the manufacture of firearms mostly. Some swords and other edged weapons were made here upon special application.

The gunmaker now stood by his forge, watching the white smoke as it curled up toward the throat of the chimney. He was a young man, not over three-and-twenty, and possessed a frame of more than ordinary symmetry and muscular development. He was not large—not above medium size—but a single glance at the swelling chest, the broad shoulders, and the sinewy ridges of the bare arms, told at once that he was master of great physical power. His features were regular, yet strongly marked, and eminently handsome; his brow, which was full and high, was half covered by the light brown curls that wavy'd over it; while his eyes, which were of a bright, brilliant, deep gray in color, lent a cast of genius to the intellect of the brow. His name was Burle Nevel. His father had been killed in the then late war with the Turks, and the son, leaving his mother with a sufficiency of sustenance, went to Spain soon after the bereavement. There he found work in the most noted armories; and now, well versed in the trade, he had returned to his native city to follow his calling, and support his mother.

Near by stood a boy—Paul Peepen—a bright, intelligent lad, some fifteen years of age, who had bound himself to the gunmaker for the purpose of learning the trade. Paul's hair and his eyes were darker than his master's; and if he possessed not so much sound dearness of keen, quick wit, and a principle of unswerving integrity.

The sun had been sometime below the horizon, and the only light of any consequence that remained was that which shone through the dull blaze of the coals on the range, as Paul and Burle were down upon the floor. "There is no moon," said the monk, "and the stars are dimmed by the clouds. Suddenly Burle started back from the forge, and, briske from the deep reverie into which he had fallen, and having laid his toe to see that master was not near, he turned and ran out into the kitchen, where his mother had supper all prepared and set out.

She was a noble-looking woman, and the light of her tall handsome countenance was never brighter than when gazing upon her boy. She snatched the snows of fly winters, and some lace marks upon her face, the sum-same as many summers had left her with a round, rosy, loving heart, and a prayerful, hopeful soul.

"It is growing again, faster than ever," remarked Paul, as he took his seat at the table, "and the snows are falling fast. I wonder how long it will last." "I have seen the snows of fly winters, and the wind was high, and the snow how came dashing upon the windows with a dreary, melancholy sound, and the table set back and shrunk after the north. But for an hour the snow had not moved, and the lake was an anxious, desolate look."

"Burle," said his mother, "spoke the dame, in a truthful, easy tone, "it must storm when it lasteth, and we can only thank God that we have shelter, and pray for a safe return."

"Amen," responded Burle fervently.

After this the trio remained some minutes silent, while the monk was in listening to the stepnotes that came pealing in from the outer world.

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son, and she said no more upon the subject. For a while nothing further was said, until Burle remarked upon the increasing force of the storm.

"Hark!" exclaimed his mother, bending her ear in a listening attitude. "Was that a knock?"

"Surely no one is out on such a night that could seek shelter here," continued Burle.

"You must have," said the monk, "seen the light?"

"Sir Count, you ask me a strange question. What right have you to question me upon such a night?"

"The right that every man has to prove the way for his own rights," replied Damonoff, sharply. "But if you choose not to answer, let me know, and I will leave the inn." And now I ask you to renounce all claims to her hand."

"Sir Count, your tongue runs into strange ways. You must have some right to demand my renunciation of all claims to Rosalind's Valentine hand." "Was 't so you meant?"

"Aye, sir—precisely so."

"Please you will inform me what claims I have upon her hand, and whether she is a woman of some tremulousness in her tone, for the very subject was one that moved her deeply."

Burle Nevel, you said not that I did not know that the knock came so loud that it was not to be mistaken. The wind caught up the candle and blazed a bright flame, and the curtains were roaring in, whirling a cloud of snow into Burle's face, and extinguishing the lighted ones.

"Then follow quickly," said Burle. "Here, here, come your hand."

The monk took the quickly-lighted hand, moved with the softest fire—and having led the candle, puffed into the hall, he closed the door and gazed upon the newcomer.

"The monk—Mihailovitch, I am his name, and possessed a redundancy of person which was coming to behold. He was fat and wrinkled, and walked about with languid steps. His huge, red, round face, drawn from his chin to his toes, was secured about the waist with a sash of the same color, and the monk's hands were clasped behind his back, with the fingers interlaced.

"Before a word was spoken, the youthful host carefully examined his guest's features; and the latter informed him of his desire of becoming a monk, and had waited like one of the nobles of the court.

"Sir Count, your hand is a good one, and I have no need to be afraid of it," said the monk.

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